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ABSTRACT

Although campus newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, yearbooks and literary magazines should be an essential element in the educational mix of the student with a disability who wants a career in mass media, the nature of student media presents a number of discouraging factors. Student media frequently become businesses of considerable size which are limited by extraordinarily tight budgets. Student media managers, like trained professionals, can be reluctant to deal with a potential student employee whose presence might involve purchase or adaptation of facilities. These managers should be aware that financial costs for adapting the workplace to the student with a disability are minimal. While facilities and access represent hurdles that need to be overcome, attitudes constitute a far bigger problem. Faculty mentors and wise action by student managers can help facilitate acceptance of the student with a disability by co-workers. A final responsibility rests with the student with a disability who should realistically determine what he or she is physically able to do, while at the same time confronting challenges and accepting work at the level of his or her own abilities, but not below them. (Twelve notes are included.) (NH)

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Integrating the Student with a Disability into Student Media

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Presented to

AEJMC Interest Group
on the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Integrating the Student with a Disability into Student Media

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for
AEJMC Interest Group
on the Status of Persons with Disabilities

This paper seeks to identify and discuss some issues related to integrating the student with a disability into student media, which provide excellent training for professional careers in mass media.

Student media managers should be aware that financial costs for adapting the workplace to the student with a disability are minimal. Greater problems occur in facilitating acceptance of the worker with a disability among student managers and co-workers. These problems can be aided by faculty mentors and wise action by student managers. A final responsibility resides in the student with a disability, who should realistically determine what he or she is physically able to do, while at the same time confronting challenges and accepting work at the level of his or her abilities, but not below them.

Integrating the Student with a Disability into Student Media

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Employment opportunities and career options are frequent topics in literature concerning people with disabilities. In the area of mass communication, literature has included employment opportunities for people with disabilities in newsrooms,[1,2] comparison of the job performance of students with disabilities relative to students without disabilities,[3] profiles of working journalists with disabilities,[4] and a discussion of newspapers' role in changing attitudes toward people with disabilities.[5]

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[1] Mark Popovich and S. Curt Willis, "Study: newspapers want to hire more handicapped workers," Editor & Publisher, May 3, 1986, p. 60.

[2] Suzann Ledbetter, Jean-Paul Sinistre and Lora Taylor Gray, "Journalism: A Rewarding Career," Careers and the Handicapped, Fall, 1990, pp. 62-71.

[3] Mark Popovich, S. Curt Willis and Fred Blevens, "Editing Accuracy and Speed By Handicapped Students, Nonjournalism and Journalism Majors," Newspaper Research Journal 10 (Fall 1988): 53-60.

[4] Laura M. Sanchez-Ramirez, "Four disabled journalists thrive in Florida," Editor & Publisher December 28, 1991, pp. 13-14.

[5] Michael R. Smith, "Newspapers must be the engine to fuel change for the disabled," Editor & Publisher, December 28, 1991, p. 40.

In a 1985 survey funded by the Gannett Foundation, Popovich found persons with disabilities accounted for an estimated 1.2 percent of the approximately 54,000 editorial workers on American daily newspapers, and editors observed difficulty in recruiting people with disabilities. Popovich notes:

> Attracting handicapped employees to the staff is one of the more difficult tasks facing editors, just as difficult as it is with other minorities. Successful editors have used community job fairs, handicapped agencies, private firms that train the handicapped, and a few even have found potential employees on college campuses.[6]

On college campuses, student media constitute an obvious pool of potential employees. Because they can be such excellent stepping-stones to professional employment, campus newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, yearbooks and literary magazines should be an essential element in the educational mix of the student with a disability who wants a career in mass media. Unfortunately, the nature of student media presents a number of factors that can discourage the student with a disability. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of those problems, and suggest solutions.

Student media provide practical training for student

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[6] Popovich, "Study: Newspapes want to hire," p. 47.

journalists as well as useful communication channels for campus populations.[7] Frequently such media transcend academic roles and become businesses of considerable size; one 1982 compilation noted "campus dailies are big business, most having circulations over 10,000 and annual budgets above $100,000."[8] In addition, with formal or informal links to academic environments, student media serve an educational purpose: some institutions grant academic credit for student media work, while others provide regular advising.

For the student with a disability, these may be factors that create barriers to work in student media. A primary concern arises from perceptions of the cost of integrating the student with a disability into the student media work environment. Just as any businesses, student media must pay attention to their budgets, and at smaller institutions those budgets may be miniscule indeed. And as businesses within educational environments, student media budgets are squeezed extraordinarily tightly.

A second problem for students with disabilities is inherent in the educational environment. By definition, student media managers are in training and relatively

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[7] Wayne Overbeck and Thomas Pasqua, Jr., Excellence in College Journalism. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983. pp. 1-3.

[8] Paul A. Atkins, The College Daily in the United States. Morgantown, West Virginia: Communi-Tech Associates, 1982.

inexperienced. As members of a society in which even trained, experienced professionals frequently exhibit less than enlightened attitudes toward people with disabilities, student managers may hold preconceptions about people with disabilites that result from incomplete understanding of medical, physical and social conditions.

These are not insurmountable problems. In fact, the primary problem of the costs of adaptations may be a moot point: The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that public institutions, including schools, must provide equal access or opportunity for the student with a disability. That means physical facilities (doors, chairs, desks, and pathways among such items) and equipment (computers, printers, studio equipment and so forth) must be adapted to allow equal access and opportunity.

In addition, the enlightened student manager will also ask a question of exclusion. Why would any business want to keep potential staff members, not to mention customers, out of the facilities? Open access facilitates recruiting as well as trade in display and classified advertising, contact with sources, and so forth.

Nevertheless, student managers might be reluctant to deal with a potential student employee whose presence would involve purchase or adaptation of facilities. These managers should know the financial facts: According to a 1982 survey of federal contractors, half the changes

companies made to accommodate employees with disabilities cost nothing, 30 percent cost less than $500, and only 8 percent cost more than $2,000.[9]

It must be recognized that adaptations are not generally a major project. The equipment is readily available, and often useful for people other than those with disabilities:

> Adaptive technology for people with mobility impairments includes alternatives to keyboards and mice, software and hardware that enable the standard keyboard to be modified, keyguards that reduce the likelihood of mistyped keystrokes, mouthsticks and headwands used to strike keys, and floppy disk guides that make it easier to handle disks.
>
> Hard disks drives reduce the need for manual manipulation of stored data. Voice input is increasingly becoming an option...
>
> For computer users with visual impairments,...solutions involve alternate displays, which include screen reading programs, speech synthesizers, modified word processors and other software.[10]

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[9] "An Enabling Law for the Disabled," Business Week June 11, 1990, p. 92.

[10] Krista Kramer, et al., "Computers and Students with disabilities: New Challenges for Higher Education," Washington, D.C.: The Interuniversity Communications Council, Inc., 1989, p. 9.

Many if not most of these "adaptations" already exist in student media offices. Trackballs are common or easily placed on keyboards, and large-type displays are easily created in virtually any desktop publishing software, as well as in some inexpensive word processing software with WYSIWYG displays.

Some adaptations might be more problematic in electronic media. Tables of appropriate height for students in wheelchairs are easily arranged, but the necessary electronic equipment can consume space in media facilities, resulting in closet-sized studios that defy access. Since expensive remodeling is seldom an option, a wise process would involve thinking ahead and planning accessible facilities whenever such opportunities and funds present themselves.

But while facilities and access constitute hurdles that need to be overcome, attitudes constitute a far bigger problem. The stigma associated with the person with a disability as a person affected both in body and intellect constitutes the greatest problem, "since most othr barriers could be dismanteld or circumvented with the assistance of people who viewed individuals who are handicapped as equals."[11]

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[11] Nancy Wentworth Dolphin, "A Conceptual Analysis of 'Barriers' as They Relate to Nurses and Nursing Students Who Are Handicapped," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1981, p. 96.

Because student media function in an academic environment, faculty associated with student newspapers, broadcasting facilities, magazines or yearbooks bear considerable responsibility in defusing discriminatory thinking. Faculty advisors should take the lead in devising or adopting facilities and/or technology for mass communication students with disabilities. In addition, by encouraging the student with a disabilty to apply for appropriate positions in student media the faculty mentor promotes the student's self-confidence, while at the same time demonstrating that ability, not disability, should be the determining factor in employment.

Once the faculty member smoothes the transition from classroom to student media newsroom, however, responsibility for integrating the student with a disability shifts to the student manager. Obviously managers must not accept discrimination in the workplace, but for the competent manager such activity should be relatively easy to identify and eliminate.

Arranging adaptations--both physical and psychological --for the student with the disability might require more ingenuity, however. No worker, whether student or professional, with a disability or without, easily admits to an inability to function. Therefore the student manager must be prepared to identify work deficiencies related to a stubborn reluctance to accept problems associated with a

disability, and then devise a solution to the problem.

For example, at one mid-sized state university's campus newspaper a student reporter with a hearing impairment submitted his first two stories with substantially inaccurate quotations, facts and figures. Given the reporter's positive academic background, the paper's news editor suspected the reporter couldn't hear statements accurately, but being ashamed to admit the problem instead took notes as he understood the words. An inexpensive voice-actuated mini-tape recorder solved the problem by allowing the reporter to replay interviews amplified with earphones.

Another case, however, illustrates difficult facets of incorporating students with disabilities into student media. Despite an enthusiastic attitude, one student writer's performance was consistently unsatisfactory, despite continual editing advice. The exhasperated editor finally suggested testing which revealed the writer's previously undetected serious learning disabilities. In this situation the disability was revealed, but student managers (and faculty mentors) must be wary of student claims regarding learning disabilities; let professional testing provide an accurate assessment or confirmation of the condition.

A final responsibility resides in the student with a disability who wishes to work in student media. One professional editor who has a mobility impairment notes the employee with a disability should "be realistic and stay

within the framework of what he or she is physically able to do, while at the same time not backing down or settling for something below his or her abilities."[12] In general, however, given support by faculty, student managers and co-workers, the student with a disability who aspires to work in student media will find a wide variety of activities that will provide excellent preparation for a career.

Summary and conclusion

This paper sought to identify and discuss some issues related to integrating the student with a disability into student media, which provide excellent training for professional careers in mass media.

Student media managers should be aware that financial costs for adapting the workplace to the student with a disability are minimal. Greater problems occur in facilitating acceptance of the worker with a disability among student managers and co-workers. These problems can be aided by faculty mentors and wise action by student managers.

Future research in this area might use quantitative methods to investigate actual numbers of students with disabilities in student media, relative to the percentage of workers with disabilities in professional media. In

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[12] Bob Vosburg, "Every disability is different--and so is every disabled person," ASNE Bulletin, April 1986, p. 17.

addition, research might follow the work of Popovich and evaluate the job performance of students with disabilities in student media.

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